

karen susman · speaker · author · coach

tools that take you to the next level

888.678.8818

Ten Presentation Skills Tips: Don't leave your mike on without them

(c)Karen Susman and Associates. Be at ease communicating with humans. 194th Edition, July 20, 2010

While recently hearing and seeing a slew of fine speakers, I pondered what made memorable speakers memorable. Here are 10 of my conclusions and advice for you (and for me).

- 1. Know your subject.** I mean really know your subject backward and forward, up and down, inside and out. You don't have to know it all, but you have to know a lot. I'm always shocked when someone tells me she or he is filling in for a speaker and presenting someone else's material. If you're asked to speak on a topic that's not your area of expertise, decline. Offer to speak on your area of expertise or suggest someone else. It's not fair to your audience, to you or the person you're subbing for when you speak on a topic you're not comfortable with.
- 2. Get to the point right away.** Tell the audience why they are there, what they will learn and how they can use the information. Then, follow what you just laid out. Don't make the audience wonder if they stepped into the wrong lecture hall.
- 3. Technique is good in moderation.** Being a professional speaker, I can spot the gimmicks even without my bifocals. One of the gimmicks I see often is the use of a sob story to get the audience on the speaker's side. One speaker I heard recently mentioned that his relative was dying of cancer and requested we say a prayer for him. Of course it's sad that his relative was ill, but he used this as a ploy. His relative's illness had nothing to do with his message on branding. The audience felt taken advantage of. Seeing the speaker's pain makes the audience uncomfortable. If you have something personal weighing heavy on your heart, once you're in front of the audience, it's show time. I remember providing a training program that lasted for several hours. During the break, I learned my brother-in-law had died. I finished the session with the same enthusiasm that I'd begun it. Does that make me cold and uncaring? No. My obligation at that moment was to the audience. It wasn't about me. I waited until I got in the car to cry. Unless your story is relevant to the message you are delivering, don't use it.
- 4. If you must use PowerPoint, use pictures, video clips and simple graphs.** One speaker had hired what he called a "starving artist" to illustrate his points. He used these slides effectively in his sales presentations.
- 5. Know how you'll enter and how you'll exit.** The most important parts of your talk are the beginning and the end. You don't have to memorize your entire speech, but you do have to memorize your first words and your conclusion. Your first words bring the audience in. Your last words are what will be remembered. Include a call to action.
- 6. On that note, don't end with Q & A.** After the Q & A, sum up quickly, repeat your main point and call to action quickly and end on a strong note.

7. **Be passionate about your topic and your point of view.** Believe in it strongly. Don't just give a report. Persuade your audience. If you don't feel strongly about your topic, why should I care?
8. **End early.** The audience won't feel cheated. Running over time can be an irritant even if you're fascinating. Review your speech and discover where you can edit your remarks if you have to. Also, your talk will usually take 25% longer to deliver than you think it will even if you've rehearsed.
9. **Use humor judiciously and where appropriate.** Jokes are dangerous because not everyone will laugh at what you think is funny. It's difficult to tell a joke well. You may also offend someone. Lawyers don't like lawyer jokes and yet speakers often feel the need to tell a lawyer joke at lawyer meetings. Spontaneous humor is my favorite, and there are skills you can learn to plan for spontaneity.
10. **Deliver with energy.** Unless you're delivering bad news or a eulogy, pump up your adrenalin. Be much more animated than you would be in a one-on-one conversation. Move with purpose. Gesture big. Wring all the range, inflection, drama and modulation out of your voice.

When you speak, you have an opportunity to spread your message to many. To make your message memorable you have to have all rockets firing. This doesn't mean you have to jump on tables and swallow fire. It does mean you have to be prepared. It does mean you have to be present. It does mean you have to answer the questions, "Why do I feel strongly about this topic and why does my audience have to hear my message?"

Burning Questions About Making Presentations

Here are a few questions that I've received while speaking, training and coaching on presentation skills. The answers I offer are based on 30 years of helping people connect one-on-one or one-on-one thousand.

Q. What do I do if I go blank in the middle of my presentation?

A. There are several things you can do:

1. Have bullet point notes to keep you on track. Glance down if you lose your place. Reconnect with your eye contact before you go on.
2. Don't read your notes.
3. Always have water handy. Pause. Take a sip. Check out notes and go on.
4. Ask the group, "Where was I?" They'll laugh and some smarty-pants is bound to remind you of your last few words.

Q. Should I start my presentation with a joke?

A. No. Jokes are difficult to tell well. There's always someone you'll offend. If your joke bombs, you've started your presentation on a bad note. Many times, speakers tell a joke that isn't relevant to the content. Don't do that either.

1. You can use related anecdotes or humorous stories that will support your message. The good thing about telling a story or anecdote that you think is funny is that if the audience doesn't laugh, you've not bombed, you've just told a story. Move on.
2. Read the local paper the day of your presentation. You're bound to find an article or headline that fits your topic. Give it a twist.
3. Point to it in the paper and you'll connect.

Q. What do you do when you are losing your audience?

A. Shift gears by:

1. Speeding up or slowing down.

2. Asking a question that gets people involved.
3. Having everyone stand up and stretch.
1. Moving physically closer to your audience. Speak and gesture with more energy.
2. Acknowledging that you don't seem to be addressing the audience's needs. Ask the group if you're on track with them and what they'd like to hear about.

Q. What do you do when you don't know the answer to a question?

- A. Tell the questioner that you don't know. Never try to fake an answer.
1. Offer to find out the answer and get back with him. Ask for his contact information. Follow up.
 2. Say you don't know and offer a resource such as web site or phone number where the answer can be found.
 3. If there is an expert on the question area in the room, call on that person to answer the question.
 4. If it's not a matter of life or death question, ask the audience for their input.